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Poetics and world literature

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Abstract What happens when we consider "poetics," a term and concept well-known from Aristotle's philosophical treatment of Greek epic and tragic drama, in the larger context of world literature as we understand it today? What would be the essential elements in the definition of poetics? What sort of critical issues it can address, and what resources it may draw on in the world's various literary traditions? In the ancient world, East Asia and South Asia all have distinct traditions of literary expression with emphasis and critical conceptualizations rather different from those of the Greek-Roman tradition. What would the consideration of poetics in a broad cross-cultural perspective lead us to? In this presentation, these are the theoretical issues to be explored to arrive at a better understanding of poetics not only in the Western tradition, but truly of the world, with the richness of content and critical functions considered with relation to a global concept of world literature.

Keywords Poetics · world literature · Aristotle · Chinese tradition

As a critical term and concept, poetics is almost inseparable from Aristotle's famous work on tragedy and epic, but when we think of poetics with regard to world literature, we need to reconsider many issues in a different perspective. In a study of tragedy in relation to Aristotle's *Poetics*, F. L. Lucas argues that only the ancient Greeks could have produced a poetics, i.e., a philosophical discussion of the nature of literary representation because, among all the peoples in the ancient world, the Greeks alone had the intellectual curiosity and capability of asking questions. "Other races have fashioned into art and story dreams as lovely; but it is from the Greeks that Europe has learnt, so far as it has learnt, to question as well as to dream, to take nothing on earth, or in heaven, for granted—that unfaith, in a word, which has also removed mountains."[1] According to Lucas, only the Greeks posed

[1] Lucas (1957, p. 12).

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questions about the world and its essence, but "the other ancient nations" did not. "They loved, as most men do still, certainty better than truth."[2] It is probably unrealistic to expect Lucas to have any knowledge about Qu Yuan (339?–277? B.C.E.), a great poet in China's Warring States period, who began his poem "Asking Heaven" with such questions: "Who could tell us about the beginning of remote time? How could it be known when the high and the low had not taken shape? Who could see through the darkness when day and night were yet undivided? How could it be known when the whole scene was undistinguishable mass?"[3] He then followed with nearly 180 questions to ask about the origin and the composition of the universe, about ancient myths and human affairs in history and near his own time. That poem is little known except to students of ancient Chinese literature, but the point is that when we now discuss poetics, a term and concept well-known since Aristotle, we need a broader frame of reference than Lucas's that begins and ends with Europe. How might we reconceptualize poetics? What sort of critical issues it would address, and what resources it might draw on? In our new approach to *poetics* and *world literature* today, we will not take either of the terms for granted, but will try to understand both in a reexamination of poetics with regard to a truly global concept of world literature.

Aristotle used poetics as a term to name his discussion of tragedy and epic because the ancient Greeks, as he complained (*Poetics* 47b), had "no common name" for all the different genres, including epic, tragic and comic drama, dialogue, elegy, and poems written in various meters.[4] Poetry in the sense of making or creation became the general name for literary representation (*mimesis*), and poetics, the theoretical inquiry into the nature of the art of representation, anticipated what in later times would be called literary criticism or literary theory. Indeed, Aristotle's *Poetics* is a major classic in the Western critical tradition, but it is worth noting that it did not become such a classic until the latter half of the sixteenth century. "The three books of *On Poets*, and the six or more books of *Homeric Problems* (presumably not in dialogue form)," as Stephen Halliwell reminds us, "were in fact the two chief works in which Aristotle's ideas on poetry were disseminated in the ancient critical tradition; while the *Poetics*, originally produced for use within the philosophical school, never became at all readily available or widely known."[5] For Europe, therefore, the *Poetics* of the Stagirite was a "rediscovery" in the Renaissance.

When it was lost in medieval Europe, the *Poetics*, along with Aristotle's other works, was studied by Arabic scholars, notably Abū al-Walīd Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), known in the West as Averroes. His commentary on the *Poetics* is important for us to relate Aristotle's work to other, rather different traditions. For instance, Aristotle makes a distinction between tragedy and comedy (48a), saying that "the latter tends to represent people inferior, the former superior, to existing humans" (35). In commenting on this passage, Averroes renders these two terms as "satire" for discouraging vices and "eulogy" for encouraging virtues. "Since every comparison and narrative representation is concerned only with the noble and the base," says Averroes, "it is clear that in comparison and narrative representation only praise and blame are sought."[6] To substitute "satire and eulogy" for Aristotle's "comedy and tragedy" seems an obviously moralistic misreading,

[2] Ibid., p. 13.

[3] Hong (1983, pp. 85–86).

[4] Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. Stephen Halliwell, 1–141 in Aristotle, *Poetics*, Longinus, *On the Sublime*, and Demetrius, *On Style*, the Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 31 (hereafter cited in the text).

[5] Halliwell (1989, p. 149).

[6] Averroes (1986, p. 66).



but Averroes' reading is linked, as the translator Charles Butterworth explains, to "his understanding that poetry focuses either on praise or on blame," which "derives more from the rank he ascribes to poetry in the hierarchy of knowledge than from his misapprehension of what Aristotle means by tragedy and comedy."[7] In ancient Greece, tragic and comic drama did have pedagogic functions, but Averroes may have overemphasized those functions with a heavier dose of moralistic intent than Aristotle's. Whether or how Averroes has misinterpreted Aristotle is debatable, but one thing is certain, namely that poetry has rather different functions in different cultures.

By an intriguing coincidence, "praise" (*mei*) and "blame" by satiric means (*ci*) are exactly the two functions Confucian commentators assigned to poetry in ancient China, particularly in the commentaries on *Shi jing* or the *Book of Poetry*. To each poem in that ancient anthology, the commentator would attach a "preface" to specify whether that particular poem is meant to "praise" the moral influence of ancient sage kings or to "blame" the decadence of a morally fallen state under a wicked ruler. In many cases, particularly to poems about love with erotic implications, such a moralistic hermeneutics of "praise" or "blame" imposes rather strained interpretations in total disregard of the literal sense of the text. Such interpretations can only be called allegorical and operate, as I have argued elsewhere, "to displace the controversial textual elements with ideologically acceptable alternatives, and to change the genre of the text from a poem about love to a canonical text about moral virtue or spiritual truth."[8] As an interpretive method, allegorical interpretation first arose in the sixth century B.C.E. with philosophical readings of Homer, and was later adopted by Philo of Alexandria and Christian exegetes to interpret the Bible. By arguing that the Homeric or the scriptural text, or the text of a poem in the *Book of Poetry*, means something different from what it literally says, allegorical interpretation mainly serves to justify the canonicity of texts that may be charged of untruth or immorality. Why allegorize? How does allegorical interpretation come about? What implications does it have for the reading of literature? These are important questions to be explored in discussions of poetics with regard to world literature.

In the Greek context of the "quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Rep*. 10.607b),[9] Aristotle's *Poetics* can be read as a defense of poetry in response to Plato's dismissal of imitation in the *Republic* as simple reflection, like a "mirror" that produces everything, and yet only "the appearance of them, but not the reality and the truth" (*Rep.* 10.596e, 821). Art imitates nature, but nature is already an imitation of ideas, which for Plato are the only true entities, thus poetry as imitation is at "three removes from reality" (*Rep*. 599a, 824), it "sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality" (*Rep*. 605b, 830), and it "waters and fosters" feelings rather than cultivating rationality (*Rep*. 606d, ibid.: 832). Plato's well-known dismissal of poetry becomes a challenge for the critical tradition in the West, and many critics throughout the centuries have tried to come up with a defense. When Aristotle speaks of art as imitation, however, he does not subscribe to Plato's tripartite and hierarchic differentiation of ideas, nature, and art, but he sees poetry imitating not the appearance of things, but their very essence. Based on such a positive understanding of imitation, Aristotle famously declares (51b) that poetry "is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars" (59). The defense of poetry has a long tradition

[7] Ibid., pp. 13–14.

[8] Zhang (2005, p. 110).

[9] Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato, including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 832 (hereafter cited in the text).

in Western criticism since Aristotle, as we find many eloquent arguments from Sir Philip Sidney to P. B. Shelley and others that passionately argue for the value of literature while repudiating the charges of untruth, immorality, or irrelevance that have been leveled against poetry.

In other traditions, however, even though poetry and poets may be subjected to criticism and even persecution, there seems no need for a defense because the place poetry occupies in the scale of things is relatively high and there is no dismissal of poetry like Plato's. Even in the West, the word "poet" comes from the Greek *poiein*, i.e., to make or create. Sidney picks up the point and ranks the poetic creation higher than what nature produces, saying that "Her [i.e., nature's] world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden."[10] In Arabic cultures, as Butterworth notes, the poet has "an even loftier position," for the poet is considered a "seer or knower," with "the Arabic word for poet (*shā'ir*) coming from the verb *sha'ar*, to know or to be cognizant of."[11] In Sanskrit poetics, the poet is a genius with extraordinary creative power as the result of accumulated good dharma. As the seventh-century critic Dandin puts it, "*Kaviprathibhā*, the poetic genius is a miraculous faculty inherited from the previous birth."[12] Likewise in the Chinese tradition, poetry or literature is sometimes given a very high status. "Great is the virtue of writing (*wen*)!" says the famous critic Liu Xie (465?–522), who claims that *wen* or literature "was born together with heaven and earth."[13] Some have understood this literally as if Chinese literature were something natural, not a human creation, but to connect literature with "heaven and earth" is not to give literature a natural origin, but a strategic move to bestow on literature the borrowed authority of nature or the entire cosmos.

In the ancient *Book of Documents*, we find probably the earliest articulation of the concept of poetry in China that "poetry speaks of one's intent, and song prolongs the spoken words." The legendary ancient Emperor Shun had just ordered his minister Kui to teach the royal princes poetry and music, and when Kui struck the stone instruments and poetry was chanted to the accompaniment of harmonious music, "gods and men were at peace," and "all the hundred animals danced in accordance."[14] This last sentence may immediately call to our mind the Greek myth of Orpheus, whose powerful song, as Pierre Somville puts it, "capable of charming all the realms of the living, from craggy rocks to the wildest beasts, suffices to ensure the cohesiveness of the cosmos and universal harmony."[15] The Orphic myth reveals a pre-Socratic notion of art before the separation of language from music and dance. "Myth, language and art," says Ernst Cassirer, "begin as a concrete, undivided unity, which is only gradually resolved into a triad of independent modes of spiritual creativity."[16] This is verified by both the Chinese and the Greek myths. Though at the beginning of the *Poetics*, Aristotle considers mimesis as common to all the arts, his later discussion turns to more specific aspects of literary representation as the art of language. In discussions of world poetics, however, we may reconsider such basic issues as the relationship between speech and music, the oral origin of earliest poetry, the connection

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10 Sidney (1970, p. 15).

11 Averroes (1986, p. 5).

12 Rajendran (2001, p. 10).

13 Liu (1958, 1: 1).

14 *Shangshu zhengyi*, *juan* 3, in Ruan (1980, 1: 131).

15 Pierre Somville, Poetics (C. Porter & D. Jouhaud, Trans.), pp. 301–313 in J. Brunschwig and G. E. R. Lloyd (eds.), *The Greek pursuit of Knowledge* (p. 303). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

16 Cassirer (1953, p. 98).

of early drama with religious rituals, and the performance of drama in which music and dance play a part in addition to language.

Aristotle sees poetry arising naturally from the human instinct of mimesis (48b), which "distinguishes them from other animals: man is the most mimetic of all, and it is through mimesis that he develops his earliest understanding." So it is "equally natural," he adds, "that everyone enjoys mimetic objects" (37). Averroes follows Aristotle in seeing mimesis "naturally giving rise to poetry."[17] The mimetic concept of poetry assumes a prior existence of an action or movement for the poet to represent in language, but the Chinese concept that "poetry speaks of one's intent" refers to a very different sort of origin. The "Great Preface" to the *Book of Poetry* (second century B.C.E.) makes a definitive statement:

> Poetry is where intent goes. At heart it is intent, and let out in words, it is poetry. When emotion is moved inside, it takes shape in words. When words are not enough, one sighs; when sighing is not enough, one draws out the words and sing; and when singing is not enough, without knowing it, one's hands wave and one's feet start to dance.[18]

In such an understanding, poetry does not arise from imitation of an external movement, but issues forth as the expression of one's inner thoughts and emotions, as articulation rather than imitation. This expressive notion of the origin of poetry also closely relates poetry to singing and dance as dramatic ways to let out emotions. In the wider perspective of world literature, therefore, we may see quite different concepts of the origin of poetry and also different relationships between poetry and the other arts, particularly the nonverbal ones.

Aristotle's discussion of tragedy is based on many examples with analysis of six elements (50a)—"plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and lyric poetry" (49), a perfectly logical discussion of an intellectual art, but an earlier concept of poetic inspiration emphasizes the irrational, even "mad," and certainly unconscious dimensions of poetic creation. Plato claims (*Apology* 22c) that poets cannot explain their own works because "it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets" (8). In a memorable metaphor of the "stone of Heraclea" (*Ion* 533d), he compares the appeal of poetry to a powerful magnet that attracts people so that "a chain is formed, quite a long one, of iron rings" (220). With some gentle irony, Plato describes the poet (*Ion* 534b) as "a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself and reason is no longer in him" (220). But he also mentions the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona (*Phaedrus* 244a) in a more serious tone, and admits that "the greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent" (491). Obviously, Plato sees the uncannily mysterious side of poetic inspiration that cannot be fully explained in logical terms, though as philosopher, he certainly prefers the logical and the rational to the irrationally inspired poetic.

Such a Platonic idea of inspiration became crucial for the idea of genius in nineteenth-century romantic literature as well as in post-Kantian aesthetics. Kant himself considers poetry as the highest of arts, which "owes its origin almost entirely to genius and is least open to guidance by precept or examples."[19] For Kant, however, what is essential in aesthetic judgment is taste, not genius, and in case the two are in conflict and one must be

17 Averroes (1986, p. 69).

18 *Mao shi zhengyi*, in Ruan (1980, 1: 269–270).

19 Kant (1987, section 50, p. 188).

sacrificed, says Kant, "then it should rather be on the side of genius."[20] In post-Kantian aesthetics, however, as H. G. Gadamer explains, "the Kantian ideas of taste and genius completely traded places. Genius had to become the more comprehensive concept and, contrariwise, the phenomenon of taste had to be devalued."[21] From Friedrich von Schelling to Sigmund Freud, the individual came to be the focus of contemplation, and art and the unconscious became increasingly linked to each other in aesthetics and psychoanalysis, in which poetry or art in general was understood either as the unconscious creation of the genius or as the sublimation of an unfulfilled wish or a repressed desire.

The idea of genius and unconscious creation can also be found in Sanskrit poetics of ancient India, though with quite different implications. In Sanskrit poetics, poetry was conceived of as something happening spontaneously, as "the outpouring of the intense *emotion with the ease and spontaneity of water* overflowing a jar."[22] Inspiration, according to Rajendran, was thought to be "a phenomenon of unpredictable occurrence," and critics such as the nineth-century Ānandavardhana held that "when the poet is rapt in contemplation, his imagination is flooded by genuine poetic figures without the least amount of conscious effort."[23] In literary creation, however, any emphasis on the unconscious must be balanced by conscious effort, and this is acknowledged almost without exception in all critical traditions. In Sanskrit poetics, as Rajendran remarks, "most of the theoreticians who speak about Pratibhā (or the intuitive faculty) also acknowledge the necessity of conscious labour for the perfection of the poetic art."[24] Thus we may understand why Yan Yu (1192?–1245?), probably the most influential critic in China of the Song dynasty, would make the following statement that would otherwise sound preposterous: "Poetry needs a different kind of talent and has nothing to do with books; it has a different kind of interest and has nothing to do with reasoning. Yet one cannot become an accomplished poet without reading many books and doing lots of reasoning."[25] First, genius is a natural and inborn talent, without which artistic creation is impossible. Even the neo-classicist Boileau warns the would-be poet at the beginning of *L'Art poétique* that if he does not feel heaven's mysterious influence and was not born under the star of a poet's genius, he will never be good at writing poetry: "*S'il ne sent point du Ciel l'influence secrète, / Si son astre en naissant ne l'a formé poète, / Dans son génie étroit il est toujours captif; / Pour lui Phébus est sourd, et Pégase est rétif.*"[26] The natural gift of a poetic genius, symbolized by the mythological Pegasus, always needs grooming, i.e., diligent study and learning, in order to bring out its full potential to real power. In *An Essay on Criticism*, Alexander Pope tells the young poet: "First follow Nature, and your judgment frame / By her just standard, which is still the same."[27] But later he gives a quite different advice through the example of Virgil: "But when t'examine every part he came, / Nature and Homer were, he found, the same," and so he concludes: "Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem; / To copy nature is to copy them."[28] Here again, the advice is to imitate nature with one's inborn

[20] Ibid., Sect. 50, p. 188.

[21] Gadamer (1989, p. 56).

[22] Rajendran (2001, p. 11).

[23] Ibid., p. 10.

[24] Ibid., p. 12.

[25] Yan (1983, p. 26).

[26] Boileau (1963, p. 47).

[27] Pope (1972, ll. 68–69).

[28] Ibid., p. 71.

talent, but also to learn from the exemplary works of one's predecessors. Genius and tradition, natural giftedness and hard work, spontaneity and careful planning, all these are necessary for an accomplished poet and a successful work of literature.

Genius is an individual talent, and it needs to be balanced by the richness of a literary tradition. When T. S. Eliot declares in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists," the romantic concept of the individual is obviously devalued in modernist poetics.[29] Insofar as literature has its own path to follow in development, literary forms, exemplary works, and generic conventions become extremely important. "Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels," as Northrop Frye puts it. "Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the *forms* of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music."[30] The emphasis further shifted from individual talent to language and literary conventions as a system in modern literary theory. As Jonathan Culler argues, "conventions are the constituents of the institution of literature," in which a poem is not autonomous and self-complete, but "an utterance that has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated."[31] Literature is here seen as almost an impersonal institution, but it is of course also the collected body of works by individual authors. How to balance the genius and tradition, the unique quality of individual talent and the exemplariness of the classics, all these are again important questions to be explored in world poetics.

Aristotle's *Poetics* offers a most influential discussion of tragic drama, and the earliest treatise in Sanskrit poetics, Bharatamuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. second century B.C.E.), also offers a comprehensive discussion of the art of drama in terms of taste (*rasa*), emotion (*bhāva*), language, and bodily gestures that give expression to various emotions. Sanskrit drama is highly stylized, as Bharatamuni describes eight kinds of taste or emotions symbolically represented in eight colors and related to eight deities: "love is purple, buffoonery white, mercy gray, violence red, bravery orange, fear black, disgust blue, and surprise yellow."[32] Apparently in Sanskrit drama as in traditional Chinese theatre and some other traditions, a common practice is to use painted masks to symbolize certain emotions or characters by various colors. Compared with Greek tragedy, Sanskrit plays and, for that matter, traditional Chinese plays, mostly close with happy endings to satisfy the moral sense of poetic justice. Thus an often asked question is whether there is tragedy in Indian or Chinese drama. The question can be explored first by looking at Aristotle's opinion about the ending of tragedies. In one place (53a), Aristotle seems to prefer tragedies that "end in adversity" (73), but he contradicts himself in another place (54a) where he considers the dramatic action "best" in which "when the person is on the point of unwittingly committing something irremediable, but recognises it before doing so" (77). It is worth pointing out that unlike later, for example, Shakespearean tragedies, Greek tragedies do not necessarily end in death or even disaster (e. g., Sophocles' Oedipus or Aeschylus' Orestes). Aristotle does not seem to have a decisive opinion as to whether tragedy should end in sorrow or pain, even though it usually does.

29 Eliot (1975, p. 38).

30 Frye (1957, p. 97).

31 Culler (1975, p. 116).

32 Huang (1999, p. 41).

Related to this—and important to any consideration of justice—is Aristotle's idea (53a) that a tragic hero is someone "who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error" (71). Aristotle's original for "error" is *hamartia*, which many ninenteenth-century critics understood as a tragic flaw, a moral weakness, even a sin, and thus the tragedy seemed to turn out a just punishment. Georg Gottfried Gervinus, for example, tried to ferret out the moral weaknesses of Shakespearean tragic heroes and found them somehow deserving their fate because, he says, "if poetry does not exhibit the rule of moral justice, it degrades itself to a lower position than that of genuine history."[33] This is rejected by most modern critics, who consider Aristotle's *hamartia*, as Frye remarks, "not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness: it may be simply a matter of being a strong character in an exposed position."[34] Frye brings up a striking image: "Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass."[35]

The image certainly alludes to the ancient fable about the oak tree struck down in the thunderstorm and the pliant reed that bent and survived unbroken. That image happens also to appear in classical Chinese literature. Cao Zhi (192–232) wrote in a poem: "Tall trees wail in the strong wind, / The sea casts off the rising waves."[36] Li Kang, a writer of about the same period, wrote in his *Treatise on Fate* that "the tree taller than the woods, the wind will break it off; the mound jutting out from the bank, the current will rush against it; and the man nobler than the average, the multitude will traduce him." In commenting on Li Kang's writing, Qian Zhongshu compares it with many other texts with the same image and points out that the same idea is expressed in a common Chinese proverb "big trees call forth big wind."[37] Now if the quintessential tragic sense is the sense of a high and exposed position, where a noble hero has no choice but to bear the brunt in a clash of forces, then, such a sense can be said to permeate many plays and poems in the East, even though the general tone of the plays, and particularly the endings, are quite different from a typical tragedy in the Greek or European tradition.

Many other basic concepts discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics*, such as recognition, the reversal of fortune, tragic hubris, and the catharsis of pity and fear, all have a tremendous influence on later criticism and prove to be perennially fascinating, giving rise to new and persuasive interpretations not only in our time, but also, it is safe to say, in the future. On the other hand, some ideas and issues related to Aristotle's *Poetics*, such as the three unities of time, place, and action, have lost their interest in modern literary criticism. In comparing epic with tragedy (49b), Aristotle mentions that "tragedy tends so far as possible to stay within a single revolution of the sun, or close to it, while epic is unlimited in time span and is distinctive in this respect (47). He also considers unity as determined by the imitation of a complete action, in which each part relates to the whole logically, but not by the depiction of one individual, who may have numerous actions that may or may not relate to one another coherently. In other words, Aristotle may have only suggested the idea of a unity of time, but not the unities of place or action as practiced by the seventeenth-century neo-classical dramatists, particularly in France. The three unities used to be a hotly debated

[33] Gervinus (1863, 1: 28).

[34] Frye (1957, p. 38).

[35] Ibid., p. 207.

[36] Cao (1956, p. 27).

[37] Qian (1986, 3: 1082).

issue in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, and Shakespeare needed to be defended by English critics such as John Dryden and Samuel Johnson, but with the demise of neo-classicism, it no longer attracts much critical attention in modern times.

In the framework of world literature, our interest is comparative and expansive, for we continue to find Aristotle's great work a source of knowledge and inspiration, even as we find in India, China, Arabia and other places alternative forms of poetics outside the Aristotelian and European tradition. The comparative work is not for competition but appreciation and cultivation, because when we look at the different critical issues and their treatments in these different poetics, we learn to appreciate the rigorous theoretical discussions of the art of literature, the various elements in different literary genres and their forms, the richness, the diversity as well as the affinities across different traditions in world literature.

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